

Where the Wolves Are

In the summer of 2010, a wolf pup was trapped in Cheboygan County Michigan, meaning that for the first time in over 100 years, there was the potential for a growing wolf population in the Lower Peninsula.

This is the wolves' story as I saw it.

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On the first day of Field Mammalogy class, my professor, Phil Myers shared the exciting news that wolves were back in the Lower Peninsula. He informed us that we would be interacting with the Michigan Department of Natural Resources as they attempted to trap and radio collar the wolves, so that they could be tracked and researched. Since childhood, I have read numerous books on wolves, becoming entranced by their complexities, and their mysteries. Being able to take part in the search for these animals in Michigan was more than I had ever expected to get out of a college class. The event was historic and in a small way my class and I would be a part of it by searching for tracks and setting our own camera traps several times per week.

Phil then chronicled the history of the gray wolf (*Canis lupus*) in Michigan, explaining that there were once wolves in all 83 counties of Michigan, but due to humans' complicated and often volatile relationship with the creatures wolves were extirpated from the Lower Peninsula by 1910 and by the 1960's, few remained in the Upper Peninsula. He told us that gray wolves were placed on the endangered species list in 1974, and efforts to reestablish wolves in the Upper Peninsula have been quite successful, allowing a population of only two wolves to grow to nearly

500 wolves in a matter of 20 years. However, up until March 2010, the Lower Peninsula remained bereft of wolves.

Everyone on the UMBS campus seemed to have caught “wolf fever” as the news spread that Field Mammalogy students would be having a special role in the trapping endeavors. People, whether pleased or skeptical about the wolves’ re-appearance, understood that this was a momentous event. My fascination with these animals was heightened further when our professor brought in a wolf specialist, hired by the DNR, to speak to our class about his plan to seek out the wolves, and regale us with his trapping stories.

When the wolf specialist, Don Lonsway, arrived he parked his immense, fully loaded truck outside of our classroom. The truck looked scary and intimidating but Don did not. He had a smaller build—an unassuming 5 foot 6 inches, with a gray scruffy beard and warm brown eyes. He spoke slowly and deliberately, not trying to impress anyone as he introduced himself to the classroom full of eager listeners. Seeming a bit uneasy at first, he began to explain the process of trapping, sampling and radio collaring wolves. When setting a trap, he first digs a small hole, in which he buries the foot trap. He explained how he modifies the trap himself, transforming it from a harsh metal claw, into a humane contraption that does not harm the animal. He then detailed the process of concealing the trap with foliage, followed by the application of scent lures. The finished product is a patch of land just like any other, invisible to any eye except for his, designed to catch only wolf paws. He told us that he has caught wolves with these traps in anywhere from a few hours to a few days but patience is key. Once an animal is trapped, he explained, it drags the metal

brace into a thicket of brush until it becomes stuck, allowing him to track and find it soon after. He then told us that he must approach the animal slowly, keeping low to the ground. A student asked, “don’t they try to bite you?” to which Don replied matter-of-factly, “No, they’ve never tried to bite me. They’re not as ferocious as people think they are”—a statement that would surprise many.

He then went on to explain the handling of the trapped wolf, telling us how he puts it down using a specific amount of tranquilizer, at which point he completely holds the wolf’s life in his hands. He must ensure that its body temperature does not plummet or spike, and that it can breath properly. He then described the process of reversing the anesthetic, which causes the animal to wake up after being collared. He explained that it involves administering a careful amount of medicine using a syringe, and with a hint of tenderness in his quiet voice, he added that he prefers to hold the animal for a while so that it will not stumble, fall and hurt itself when it awakes. He does this despite the obvious danger to himself. I began to respect and admire his dedication to the safety of the animals—he clearly transcends his job requirements to protect the wolves.

After explaining the daily duties involved in his extraordinary job, he agreed to share some of the peculiar experiences that he had had over the years. His tone remained objective, yet as he became more immersed in his stories , it became apparent, at least to me, that he knew—and kept—many of the wolves’ secrets. He first dispelled many of the false attributes given to wolves, telling us that wolves are not the vicious beasts that many people think they are. He stressed rather that they are curious creatures, and that when they encounter humans they will often circle

them, assess the situation and move on—just as interested in us as we are in them. He told us of instances where he was inspecting wolf pups, and found that the alpha male would escort him to and from the den, with the alpha female bringing up the rear, cautiously observing.

This curiosity and intelligence has allowed wolves to adapt to humans in many unexpected ways. For example, they use the power lines and two tracks that intersect in the forest for easier travel, although many people at first thought these things destroyed habitat. Don also told us that contrary to what many think, wolves do not just hunt the weak and the sick, they hunt whatever they can get. However, he felt strongly that deer populations were not in jeopardy because of the arrival of wolves. Problematically, wolves have also adapted to farmer' attempts to thwart the predation of livestock. Don told us that he has seen cases where wolves have prevailed over animals such as llamas, which are often placed in fields to guard sheep, by killing and eating them. Also, wolves learn from their mistakes, often allowing them to avoid traps once they or their offspring become trapped.

What I found even more compelling than what he knew about the wolves, was what he did not know—what no one knows. For example, Don has found that wolves often re-establish territory in the very places where the last of their numbers were exterminated in the years before wolf hunting was illegal, perhaps showing that these areas hold a higher significance for them. And when these creatures sense their imminent death, they retreat to a bog or swamp to die alone. Another strange quirk: wolves have in some cases accepted hybrid wolf/dogs into their packs,

despite obvious differences. The very fact that it is nearly impossible to age a wild wolf is a testament to their mysteriousness.

At the end of the class period Don thanked the class for their enthusiasm, and unexpectedly offered to allow students to ride along with him on some of his daily trap checks. I, along with the rest of the class was shocked at our luck in being able to participate in such a rare and risky endeavor. The day left me feeling invigorated and I could not wait until my turn to ride with the wolf trapper.

When that day finally arrived my alarm sounded at 7:00 am but I was already awake with anticipation. I bounced out of bed and ran down to the dining hall for a hurried breakfast, then went outside to wait.

Don pulled up promptly at 7:45, and swung open the door, greeting me with a smile and a warm hello. I was surprised by his friendliness, as I expected a rougher persona from someone who once casually mentioned that he had fought three bears in his life—and won every fight.

We pulled out of the Bio Station and I could not help but get my hopes up as we drove to check the first of about 15 carefully concealed traps. I reminded myself of what my English professor said, “Sometimes not finding the wolves is even more meaningful than finding them.” They possess the rights to their mystery.

As we continued the drive down backcountry roads, I quickly pulled my journal out, ready to unleash the slew of questions I had stored up in my mind since hearing Don’s talk to my Field Mammalogy class. His answers to my questions were simple and unpretentious. He remained staunchly unbiased, always taking on a

utilitarian point of view about the wolves, yet he seemed bothered by how little people have adapted to the idea of wolves since the years when they were being hunted ruthlessly. When I asked why he thought this was the case he replied, “wolves are not afraid of humans; people want an animal to fear them.” Generation after generation has vilified the wolves despite their lack of threat to the public. As someone who loves wolves and was thrilled by the thought of a growing wolf population in the Lower Peninsula, I feared that this sentiment would endanger the chances of this happening.

This reminded me of how in Wyoming a veritable war on wolves is being waged, as they are widely viewed as vermin or pests due to the destruction of livestock and game populations. There, the relationship between human and wolf is more than just complex, it is explosive. While tourists and wildlife enthusiasts flock to Yellowstone to catch a glimpse of a wolf pack, sportsman and farm owners call for their extermination, starting protests and spreading anti-wolf propaganda. There is clearly no easy answer to this issue—often the case when ethics, ecology, and economics become entangled.

Wyoming is evidence of the fact that the relationship between wolves and humans continues to be fraught with tension. After all, besides ourselves wolves are among the largest predators in the US and we compete with them for territory and meat. Also involved in the debate are scientists, who struggle to understand the important ecological implications of burgeoning wolf populations in areas like Wyoming. They hope to gain knowledge that could help balance unstable wild

lands—information that would certainly be useful for understanding the implications of our newly arrived wolves.

As Don and I discussed these convolutions, we stopped at the sand pit, where the first pictures of the Lower Peninsula wolves were taken, to check several traps. There were no wolves or tracks in sight. Don seemed to think that these wolves were too smart for him. They were not following the normal patterns of wolves: using the same areas over and over again, following their own tracks—it seemed these wolves had the ability to vanish and re-appear. Don joked, “We won’t find them here if they are caught in a trap down the road.” We climbed back into the truck, still hopeful.

We continued on his route, driving by areas where he had set traps. I persistently asked him questions, trying to pull as much information out of him as I could, intent on making the most of the unique opportunity. I asked him how he got started in such a unique line of work. He casually explained that 25 years ago, when wolves were becoming an undeniable issue in the Upper Peninsula, he had heard a radio show asking for information that listeners had regarding wolf activity in the area. Don had been tracking and observing a wolf pack in the area on his own, without any training, so he called the station. He explained to me simply, “They were looking for wolves and I knew where some were.” This natural ability to understand and anticipate wolves has turned into a career spanning several decades, making him one of the most knowledgeable and experienced trackers in the U.S.

We pulled off the dirt road again. The sun was high in the sky. Trap after trap came up empty and while we saw dozens of deer prints, there were no new wolf

prints in sight. Our prospects were grim. We drove down a dirt road leading to the final series of traps that lined a dense forest—empty. Don remarked on the evasiveness of these particular wolves, joking that they may have some Indian spirits helping them. On the way back to the truck, I found myself peering into the darkened trees, half expecting to see several pairs of eyes watching us. I couldn't help but think the wolves were laughing at our futile attempts to ensnare them.

Back at camp, I contemplated the day. We did not catch any wolves, but I felt no frustration, because I know that it was merely a testament to their elusiveness—they remain always one step ahead of us. Don seemed convinced that they had taken up residence in a corn field. And while I should have been disappointed, instead I felt alive with anticipation for the next development in the wolf phenomenon.

Several days later, a wolf pup was caught. The event was even more momentous than the original wolf sightings, because it proved that pups had been born in the Lower Peninsula for the first time in a century. No group was more thrilled than my mammalogy class because two of our own were there to witness the processing of the wolf pup, allowing our class to be among the first people in Michigan to see the pictures of the gangly, green-eyed pup, being handled by Don. Josh and Bri recounted the morning's find, explaining how Don could not collar the pup, which weighed about 25 pounds, because it would soon grow out of the radio collar. Instead, he took some blood for analysis and tagged its ear. Don was able to do all of the processing without administering anesthetic and the pup was released after a short time, un-harmed. The news spread, first throughout the bio station, and then throughout all of Michigan, and while many were pleased, the event carried

mixed implications. Don reminded us that these wolves were smart and would certainly learn from their missteps. This meant that the adult wolves, which the DNR was really after, would be warier from now on.

His foreshadowing appeared to be true, and the Lower Peninsula wolves once again exercised their mysterious ability to vanish. Don reported back to my class periodically, telling us that he found tracks sporadically, but for several weeks his traps came up empty every morning. Still, Don and the DNR maintained that the wolf pack remained in the Lower Peninsula; they were just getting better at hiding.

In early August Don parked his truck in front of our classroom one last time to say goodbye, explaining that he needed to respond to depredation cases in the Upper Peninsula. I was disappointed, but still curious about the wolves so I decided to contact Jennifer Kleitch, a wildlife biologist from the Michigan DNR. She gladly answered my questions, informing me that the search for the Lower Peninsula wolves was by no means over; the DNR had merely changed their approach. They would still be tracking the wolves, monitoring camera traps, and responding to wolf sightings by the public, and if another trapper became available they would resume their efforts to radio collar the wolves.

In response to my questions about Michigan residents' reactions to the new wolves, Jennifer explained that similar to the situation in Wyoming, there has been a mixed response, stating: "People are cautiously optimistic, though there are folks at both ends of the spectrum, ranging from those that want to eradicate to those that would like to have more animals introduced. The majority of folks seem to be

somewhere in the middle—feeling that this is a success for conservation.” I realized that the ability of these wolves to survive depends largely on their acceptance by the public, which is why Jennifer and others in her field are working to teach people the truth about wolves, rather than perpetuate rumors. Speaking to her caused me to feel hopeful that the public will give to the wolves the same second chance that the wolves have given to Lower Michigan.

Fast-forward to a scene in a grassy meadow which is said to be a rendezvous site for the local wolves. In the middle of the field sits an eclectic group of people: a biologist, an ornithologist, a mammalogist a poet and a dozen or so students including myself; all of us here on this night to hear wolves howl. I wait quietly beneath the stars surrounded but the stillness of the trees. I hear the wolf howl recording, intended to elicit howls in response, and hope they hear it too. Several seconds pause, followed by a chorus of yips and cries in the distant forest. It could just be dogs or coyotes, but after a summer of fruitless searching, I let myself believe that the sound is coming from where the wolves are.

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